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## Embodied Cognition and the Grotesque in Calvino's *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* and Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano*

Caracciolo, Marco

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Embodied Cognition and the Grotesque in Calvino's *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* and Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano*

Marco Caracciolo  
*University of Groningen*

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**Marco Caracciolo,  
"Embodied Cognition and the Grotesque in  
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**Abstract:** In his article "Embodied Cognition and the Grotesque in Calvino's *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* and Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano*" Marco Caracciolo analyzes the multiple dimensions of embodied experience and how they can be brought to bear on literary texts. Drawing on scholarship in cognitive science, he argues that the embodiment of people's engagement with the world emerges from the interaction between the physical structure of the body and socio-cultural practices. Caracciolo shows how such nexus of biological make-up and culture can give rise to particularly complex meanings in the representation of grotesque bodies. In order to illustrate his postulates, Caracciolo analyzes Italo Calvino's *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (*The Watcher*) and Edoardo Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano*, wherein distorted bodies play an important role.

**Marco CARACCILO**

**Embodied Cognition and the Grotesque in  
Calvino's *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* and Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano***

The notion of "embodiment" has wide currency in cognitive science, where "embodied" approaches to the mind are often contrasted with the view of the mind as an abstract, disembodied, computer-like processor. In opposition to the artificial intelligence-driven cognitive science of the 1970s and 1980s, "embodied" cognitive scientists argue that apparently incorporeal mental operations — which involve the use of abstract concepts and categories — are dependent on people's bodily make-up and sensorimotor capacities and therefore embodied intrinsically (see, e.g., Gibbs; Lakoff and Johnson).

In the study at hand, I show how the interest in embodiment in cognitive science can have implications for the study of culture and in particular of literary texts as artifacts embedded in a network of socio-cultural practices (on the cognitive turn in cultural studies, see, e.g., Zunshine; Schmidt <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1569>>; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). Human embodiment, I argue, is a nexus of physical and physiological structure and socio-cultural practices, and as such provides a unique meeting ground for cognition and culture. A focus on embodiment would therefore be ideally suited to bringing together insights from cognitive science, as well as more traditional, cultural approaches to the arts. In literature, embodiment can be explored from a thematic perspective by looking at literary representations of bodies or from a reader-response perspective by examining the audience's physical responses to literary representations (see Caracciolo; Chabot Davis). I synthesize these perspectives by positioning these issues in a phenomenological tradition and focus on the ways readers can respond to — and therefore experience — the literary representations of characters' bodies. Maurice Merleau-Ponty posited that there is an interrelation between culture and biological structure in people's lived experience of situations: everything "is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behaviour which does not owe something to purely biological being — and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life" (*Phenomenology* 220). We can also draw on Mark Johnson's distinction between five "dimensions of embodiment": biological (the physical and biochemical processes that sustain our living bodies); ecological (the body as a result of the interaction between an organism and its ecological niche); phenomenological (the lived experience of one's body); social (the intersubjective practices surrounding one's own — and other people's — body); and cultural (the cultural meanings attached to the body in a given society and historical period) (164-66). Note how the phenomenological dimension seems to occupy a strategic position between the body as biologically and ecologically determined and the body as socio-culturally constructed. My theoretical proposition here is that phenomenology — the investigation of people's lived experience — can provide a comprehensive framework for studying the interaction between the biological and the socio-cultural dimensions of embodiment.

The role of phenomenology in theorizations of embodiment has been explored by anthropologists such as Thomas J. Csordas and psychologists such as Howard R. Pollio, Tracy B. Henley, and Craig J. Thompson. According to Csordas, poststructuralist thought has tended to characterize the body as a purely discursive entity, one devoid of any materiality or physicality: "the [culture as] text metaphor has virtually ... gobbled up the body itself" (146). Johnson puts this point as follows: "The postmodern literary theorist tends to focus too exclusively on the cultural fashioning of the body, as if the flesh were nothing but a palimpsest upon which culture has inscribed its definitions of what counts as body" (166). By contrast, phenomenological approaches such as Csordas's place a premium on how the body is experienced by people in contexts of action and interaction. In their *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life*, Pollio, Henley, and Thompson offer a similar account identifying a number of "themes" in the way a group of participants discussed their relationship with the body over a series of interviews (74-92). All of these themes — e.g., using the body in physical exercise, being aware of one's body painful or pleasurable states, being aware of changes in one's body, etc. — show how embodiment is always shaped by socio-cultural practices: for instance, conceptions of gender roles and social decorum influence how we relate to and use our body in intersubjective engagements. And yet, embodiment cannot be abstracted from the material conditions of the body, its physiological states

and functioning: proprioception (or the pre-reflective awareness of one's own body), sensations such as pain and sexual arousal, movements and actions, and emotions have a pre-discursive existence which can be probed and even measured through scientific tools. Indeed, as I use the term here, "embodiment" can be said to be determined by the interaction between socio-cultural meanings and practices and the biological wiring of people's bodies.

What do I mean by "interaction"? In brief, the intuition is that people's physical and cognitive make-up acts as a constraint on socio-cultural practices, which in turn can influence people's experience of — and responses to — situations in important ways. This view goes back to Katherine N. Hayles's "constrained constructivism" and has been articulated more recently by Edward Slingerland and Mark Collard: "explanations for higher level phenomena — such as ethics, morality, and religion — should take account of any limits that are set by well-established hypotheses concerning lower-level phenomena" (17). Language is a case in point. Despite their arbitrary nature, human languages show a tendency to model abstract concepts and categories on simple patterns of bodily interaction with the world — patterns known as "image schemata" in cognitive linguistics (see Evans and Green 177-91). George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's work has sparked extensive discussion on image schemata (e.g., up-down, in-out, source-path-goal) and on how they can be used in tandem with metaphorical language to establish relations between abstract concepts. A sentence like "racism must be kept out of the classroom" for instance, works by mapping a series of abstract entities (racism, school teaching, the interactions among students and teachers) onto a concrete situation where racism must be prevented from entering a physical space. The way we conceptualize the world is, therefore, constrained by our embodied experience of spaces and situations. This does not mean, of course, that different cultures and languages conceptualize the world in the same way: conceptual metaphors and image schemata are building blocks which allow for considerable cultural variation. Culture can provide "scaffolds" for human cognition, extending our cognitive faculties through external devices such as audio-video recorders, pens and notebooks, computers, and so on (see Clark). Culture can also modify our emotional systems in ways which give rise to inherently cultural emotions such as love, shame, and guilt. This complex feedback loop between bodily make-up, cognition, and cultural practices is at the root of the phenomenological account of embodiment I offer.

My interest in phenomenology is part of a larger phenomenological turn that has been gaining ground in a number of disciplines lately. In their *The Phenomenological Mind* Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi show how phenomenology can help reframe many of the key questions of cognitive science, from perception to intersubjectivity to consciousness, thereby providing a framework for empirical research (see Gallagher and Zahavi). At the same time, in the humanities several authors and fields have embraced phenomenology. Kathleen Lennon closes her broad survey of feminist perspectives on the body by calling attention to phenomenological thinkers such as Gail Weiss and Iris Marion Young, who emphasize "experiences of bodies in situations, in which it is impossible to disentangle so-called 'natural' and 'social' elements" (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/feminist-body>>; see also Weiss; Young). In disability studies, scholars have pointed out the need to investigate the phenomenology of disability as a complement to the field's long-standing interest in disability as social construction. In her *Extraordinary Bodies* Rosemarie Garland Thomson wrote that disability "is not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do" (6). This is a typical — indeed, textbook — expression of the poststructuralist attitude towards the body. Yet, four years after Garland Thomson, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell critiqued the poststructuralist approach in "Re-Engaging the Body" by arguing that "disability studies has strategically neglected the question of the experience of disabled embodiment" (368). To make up for this shortcoming, Snyder and Mitchell suggest looking at the phenomenology of disabled embodiment as it is conveyed in performances by disabled artists. And in literary studies Rita Felski turned to phenomenology as a means of investigating varieties of readers' responses to literary texts.

Of course, this appeal to phenomenology is hardly new in literary studies. In the history of twentieth-century literary theory a number of scholars — including Roman Ingarden, Georges Poulet, and Wolfgang Iser — have drawn on or aligned themselves with phenomenology. What can a phenomenological account of literature bring to the table of these existing accounts today? In my view, an important area of innovation would be methodology. Classical models of the reading

experience have been criticized for their reliance on an ideal reader (see Ingarden; Iser) or author (see Poulet) which reflected the interpreter's own predispositions and interests. This shortcoming can be addressed by combining phenomenological insights with empirical work carried out in cognitive science. Empirical research proves helpful here, since it enables researchers to shed light on a background of cognitive processes that are more or less shared by readers, therefore constraining their literary experiences. This method bears resemblance to Glenn Braddock's "indirect phenomenology": it produces phenomenological analyses which, despite being based on the researcher's own introspective awareness, are at least consistent with empirical work involving a statistically significant number of participant subjects. Thus, it becomes possible to distinguish between three levels of readers' engagement with literature: cognitive-level processes (which are unconscious and automatic); embodied, imaginative, and emotional responses (which are experiential because they have a phenomenological quality: there is a way it is like to feel an emotion or to experience a mental image); and socio-cultural constructions of meaning such as interpretations or judgments. The use of empirical findings and psychologically realistic models marks off the kind of phenomenological investigation I propose from the speculative (and introspective) work of Iser, Poulet, and others.

Starting with Mikhail Bakhtin's and Wolfgang Kayser's thought, the grotesque as a mode of artistic representation received considerable attention in twentieth-century literary theory and aesthetics. More recently scholars sought to understand the grotesque in terms of the cognitive and emotional processes it involves — processes which, taken together, appear to define the grotesque experience. Noël Carroll contends that the grotesque operates by subverting "our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order" (298). Thus, human/animal hybrids are grotesque because they blur the boundary between two distinct ontological categories, "human beings" and "animals." István Czachesz expands Carroll's account by proposing a multi-dimensional model of the grotesque. Like Carroll, Czachesz identifies the basic cognitive mechanism of the grotesque with the violation of ontological categories through either counterintuitiveness or metamorphosis. According to Pascal Boyer's cognitive theory of religion, an entity is "counterintuitive" when it possesses a feature that is unusual for the category to which it belongs: for instance, an immortal human is counterintuitive. "Metamorphosis" refers, of course, to the transformation from one category to another, as in human/animal hybrids. But metamorphosis and counterintuitiveness are, for Czachesz, only two dimensions of the grotesque. The third, fundamental dimension has to do with emotion and sensation: through the representation of distorted (tortured, suffering, deformed, gaping) bodies, the grotesque is associated with the basic emotions of fear and disgust and with the mental simulation of other people's pain. Indeed, according to Czachesz, grotesque "treatments of the human body are likely to be represented in the mind of the reader or listener using basic simulations of simple actions and sensations related to the respective body parts" (228).

In a study with Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), P. Wright, G. He, N.A. Shapira, W.K. Goodman, and Y. Liu appear to confirm Czachesz's hypothesis. Brain imaging revealed that observing pictures of mutilation stimulates the superior parietal cortex, an area of the brain associated with the elaboration of somatosensory information (see Rizzolatti, Fogassi, Gallese). Wright, He, Shapira, Goodman, and Liu speculate that the parietal cortex is activated by pictures of bodily mutilation because the "viewer processes them by mentally re-enacting the bodily condition of the victim in the picture" (2349). It follows that the experience of the grotesque results from a combination of cognitive-level processes (the violation of ontological categories through counterintuitiveness and metamorphosis) and felt embodied responses to the representation of emotionally salient bodies.

Bakhtin's discussion of the grotesque body in his *Rabelais and His World* adds an important element to Czachesz's account. Bakhtin was the first thinker to put the body on the agenda of twentieth-century literary theory, anticipating the approach to embodiment I offer here; however, unlike Czachesz, who focuses on the universal components of the grotesque experience, Bakhtin lays an emphasis on its context by exploring the interrelation of biological body and socio-cultural meanings in Rabelais's work. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body is characterized by a violation of ontological categories all the way down, since it is the very distinction between the body and the world



that is collapsed by the grotesque. Hence, organs such as the bowels, the genitals, the mouth, and the anus are foregrounded: "All of these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome" (Bakhtin 317). Bakhtin makes the further step of tying this open body to the Renaissance worldview and the belief in a deep connection between humankind and the cosmos. Via his depictions of bodies that merge with the external world, Rabelais shows how humans "assimilated the cosmic elements: earth, water, air, and fire; he discovered them and became vividly conscious of them in his own body. He became aware of the cosmos within himself" (Bakhtin 336). Thus, Bakhtin concludes that the "grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture" (325).

Such thematic interwovenness of the grotesque body points to the socio-cultural dimension of embodiment highlighted above: embodiment is neither purely biological substance nor discursive construction, but rather the outcome of a complex interaction between the biological and the cultural. This interaction is often exposed by the deformation of the body in grotesque representations: by destabilizing ontological and categorical boundaries, grotesque bodies can involve readers in embodied and emotional responses (fear, disgust, vicarious pain) while at the same time hinting at larger socio-cultural meanings. Why do distorted bodies have this power to reveal the multi-layered nature of embodiment? The answer, in my view, lies in the self-awareness of one's embodiment that the representation of distorted bodies can create. As suggested by Annie van den Oever, the grotesque exploits a mechanism of familiarization/defamiliarization: it challenges readers' and viewers' expectations as to what is normal, natural, proportionate. But there is more: Viktor Shklovsky wrote that defamiliarization "is a means of experiencing the process of creativity" (6; see also Schmid), since it draws attention to the process of engaging with artifacts rather than to the artifacts themselves. For readers, such process involves responding to literature at the embodied level: thus, when our familiarity with the body is called into question by forms of embodiment that are deviant from (what we take to be) our own, we become more self-conscious of the patterns and practices that make up our embodiment — and that we bring to bear on texts.

Based on my theoretical position above, in the following I offer close readings of two novels where grotesquely distorted bodies take center stage: Italo Calvino's *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (*The Watcher*) and Edoardo Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano*. These novels were both published in 1963 in the context of post-war Italian literature. I choose these texts because their historical and geographical proximity throws into sharp relief the diversity of the authors' treatments of distorted embodiment — the different stylistic strategies through which grotesque bodies can be represented, and the range of socio-cultural meanings they can take on (for another attempt at contrasting these novels in terms of their representation of bodies, see Bazzocchi 59-89). Investigating the experience of reading these works enables me to demonstrate how readers' emotional and embodied responses and meaning-making at the socio-cultural level converge in the phenomenology of reading.

The protagonist of Calvino's novel, Amerigo, is a member of the Italian communist party serving as a poll watcher on an election Sunday in Torino. The polling station to which he has been assigned is a special one since it is located within the Cottolengo Institute, a religious hospital housing patients affected by severe disabilities, usually as a result of congenital defects and deformities. Told by a heterodiegetic narrator, but filtered consistently through the protagonist's narrative perspective, the novel intertwines the narration of Amerigo's day at the poll station with his reflections prompted by the sight of the hospital's disabled patients. Readers are therefore confronted from the very beginning with Amerigo's worldview and ideological convictions. However, this does not mean that the audience's more experiential responses drop out of the equation. As I posit above, the representation of distorted forms of embodiment is sufficient to trigger strong and complex emotional reactions. Take, for example, the following passage about a woman's appearance sitting on a stool: "a little woman appeared, very tiny, seated on a stool; or rather, not exactly seated, because she didn't touch the floor with her feet, nor did her legs sway, nor were they folded under her. They weren't there, her legs" (Calvino 16). Although this passage gives no explicit indication of emotional arousal on the characters' part, few readers are likely to miss the high emotional intensity of the last sentence, which

contradicts a general expectation about the human body's integrity. According to a questionnaire administered to the participants of the fMRI study mentioned above, pictures of physical mutilation are associated with high disgust ratings — even higher than pictures of contaminated objects (for instance, spoiled food).

But disgust is not the only emotion elicited by radical alterations in the human body. In 1982 Leslie Fiedler called attention to the inherent ambiguity of our responses to the severely disabled. Fiedler's work can be seen as an antecedent of the phenomenological turn within disability studies: "Rather than explain away the visceral nature of responses to physical and cognitive differences, Fiedler seizes upon ambivalence as a universal response to the mystery of human variation" (Mitchell and Snyder 36). According to Fiedler, our initial reaction to distorted embodiment is one of fear, "first of the cruel but just forces which make the disabled what they are; and then in an odd act of displacement, of the disabled themselves" (64). Calvino's text represents visceral responses such as disgust and fear only rarely, for instance when Amerigo and the other polling station officers are shown the room housing the most severely disabled patients (62). Further, despite the text's restraint on representing characters' responses at this level, these emotions are — in various combinations and to different degrees — likely to be part and parcel of readers' experience of the storyworld. Moreover, as Fiedler explains, these negative responses to disability tend to be accompanied by a sense of pity, a feeling of social solidarity for the disabled. But again direct expressions of compassion are almost absent from Amerigo's thoughts during his day at the hospital. This reticence, of course, does not prevent the audience from feeling compassion while reading the many descriptions of disfigured bodies. Consider, for instance, the following passage: "no position suited that body any more: the arms, in the great white shirt, were numbed, the hands were bent back, and so were the legs, as if the limbs were trying to turn upon themselves, seeking refuge" (60). The patient is bent in such an absurdly contortionist position that it appears difficult even to imagine what his body might look like. This very resistance to being imagined dramatically heightens both our fear of the patient's disfigurement and — indirectly — our sense of pity and sorrow at his existential condition.

By contrast, in Amerigo's coming to terms with extreme disability, his emotional responses seem to be consistently diverted to higher-order, conceptually and socio-culturally complex form of meaning-making. We find a specific example of this process in the protagonist's attempts to empathize with the patients of the Cottolengo hospital. Despite the ambiguity of the everyday usage of the term, empathy should be distinguished from sympathy: while sympathy is an emotion that we feel for another human being, empathy is a form of perspective-taking in which we feel (or, more generally, we experience) what another human being feels or experiences (see Coplan). Amerigo does try to see the world from the disabled patients' perspective, but even in this case he rarely ventures into imagining the phenomenological "feel" of physical disability: he limits himself to contemplating the significance of distorted embodiment from a conceptual standpoint. Take, for instance, these thoughts: "A world, Cottolengo ... that could have become the only world in the world if the evolution of the human species had reacted differently to some prehistoric cataclysm or some pestilence ... A path evolution might yet take, Amerigo reflected, if atomic radiations do act on the cells that control the traits of the species. And the world might become populated by generations of human beings who for us would be monsters, but who to themselves will be human beings in the only way that beings are human" (22-23). There is, of course, something akin to an empathetic process at work here — a switch from Amerigo's able-bodied perspective to the perspective of a disabled person in a distorted world. But note that such perspective shift is made possible by the hypothetical — and purely conceptual — nature of Amerigo's train of thought. Only after considering an unlikely scenario can he conceive a world whose inhabitants relate to their disabled bodies as if they were the norm. In doing so, Amerigo seems to overlook the fact that such existential condition — far from being a speculative construct — is the everyday experience of the disabled patients of the institute. Indeed, if distorted embodiment attracts Amerigo's attention, it is only in so far as it is laden with socio-cultural meanings. In particular, the character's perspective on distorted embodiment is intertwined with his reflections on the complexity of reality. Two concrete — and competing — images of this complexity crop up in the character's consciousness: "At times the world's complexity seemed to Amerigo like the leaves of an artichoke; at other times, it seemed a clump of meanings, a gluey dough" (7). The



hesitation between these metaphors for reality — and their underlying epistemologies — creates the backdrop for the whole novella: is the human world a bundle of neatly separable threads? Or is it rather a gluey dough in which the borders of phenomena — and the very possibility of distinguishing them — are inevitably lost? Although in the end the character seems to lean towards the former, more optimistic image, the specter of the unknowable mess is never fully exorcized.

The dough metaphor is reminiscent of the non-ordinary bodies of the inhabitants of the Cottolengo hospital: the patients are sometimes perceived by Amerigo as embodying — literally — the challenge to an orderly reality in which the boundaries of the body are as clearly drawn and separable as the leaves of the artichoke. Following Bakhtin, the grotesque is the representational mode in which "the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome" (317). For Bakhtin, the subversive and vital element of distorted embodiment depends on such erosion of the body's integrity. The polling station officers appear to be aware of the subversive potential of the patients' distorted bodies: "all sat there ... waiting for some presence to make itself known from those invisible recesses, perhaps a challenge" (Calvino 16). Still, such challenge to the ordinary, non-distorted world is already an interpretive structure imposed on disability from the outside. It never receives confirmation from the experience of distorted embodiment, simply because that experience is kept at an objectifying distance by the protagonist's reflections. Reading *The Watcher* thus invites the audience to engage with some aspects of its protagonist's socio-cultural meaning-making — in particular, his worldview and ideological convictions. The experiential dimension both of Amerigo's transactions with the world and of physical disability is never explored by the text, although it may surface now and then in the dynamics of readers' involvement. Calvino's novel rests on this subtle balance between the textual foregrounding of the protagonist's reflections and the importance that embodied and emotional responses are likely to take on in readers' phenomenology.

The experience of reading Sanguineti's *Capriccio italiano* is significantly different. Despite the strange creatures who populate the Cottolengo hospital, Calvino's novel constructs a storyworld that is reasonably familiar to any reader who is acquainted with the reality of Western politics, medical institutions, and serious physical disability. By contrast, Sanguineti's experimental style places distorted bodies where one would least expect them: in the middle of a seemingly ordinary story of husband and wife. The text is articulated into a series of 111 numbered narrative tableaux. Some of them are related to the pregnancy of Luciana, the narrator's wife and other fragments can perhaps be interpreted as a series of flashbacks to episodes of the protagonist's past life. Yet these scenes never add up to a coherent, unifying narrative. Thus, readers' initial response to this anti-narrative text is likely to be one of puzzlement and disorientation. How are we supposed to make sense of this experimental, fragmentary novel full of bizarre situations and characters? Of the naturalizing reading strategies described by Jan Alber, one appears especially relevant here: it consists in reading the narrative fragments that make up *Capriccio italiano* as the product of a hallucinatory or dream consciousness (see Alber 84-85) — probably the consciousness of the narrator (Edoardo), who seems to be disassembling and distorting scenes from his past. We can take as an example of this naturalizing strategy the interpretation offered by Tibor Wlassics, one of the first critics to examine Sanguineti's novel closely. Wlassics argues that Edoardo is a "dreamer-protagonist" who "cannot wake up and discard with a single gesture the dizzying and illogical jumble of the night" (111; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Several elements in Sanguineti's novel seem to support this oneiric interpretation, including some self-conscious references to dreams and dreaming. For instance, we read: "Then everything happens as in the other dream, because some large marks are visible on the ceiling, as if it rained and the roof were full of holes" (Sanguineti 13). *Capriccio italiano* appears to establish a close link between dream-like or hallucinatory situations and distorted bodies. Such combination throws into sharp relief the grotesque nature of the characters' — and especially the protagonist's — embodiment. Consider, for example, the following passage: "And immediately, then, I started spitting at the mirror, and then my face started going all wrong, and I couldn't see the navel, but only a foamy blotch, and a knee started melting down, and after that I almost erased an ear, and then the testicles, and everything like that, at random" (15).

While in Calvino's text the non-ordinary body is a product of biological, genetic forces, Sanguineti focuses on the process whereby the protagonist's perfectly ordinary body is deformed and distorted. A

few aspects of this passage are worth stressing. First, the use of the philosophically charged image of the mirror is hardly coincidental. One may think of Jacques Lacan's theory that, in the so-called "mirror stage" of the child's development, seeing one's own body in a mirror leads to the emergence of the self-other differentiation. Within a phenomenological framework, Merleau-Ponty discusses this issue in an essay entitled "The Child's Relations with Others." For Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is inextricably bound up with subjectivity, since the consciousness of our body as ours (proprioception) provides the basis for the self. Yet the boundaries of this self are unstable and vague until the child has learned to associate himself/herself with the image of the body as reflected in a mirror and perceived visually. In Merleau-Ponty's words, through my mirror image "I leave the reality of my lived me in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal, fictitious, or imaginary me, of which the specular image is the first outline" ("The Child's" 136). Such "ideal" self includes what has been called the "body image," or the conception of our own body that we develop through perception, intersubjectivity, and participation in cultural practices (see Gallagher and Zahavi 145-46). Seeing one's own mirror image marks the first step towards the construction of a body image: the body no longer coincides with the pre-reflective awareness of one's own body (through proprioception), but is projected into the public, shared world, where it may be seen and judged by others.

Sanguineti's text can be read in light of these considerations. The character's saliva is thrown outward, toward the mirror, in a way that affects — both literally and symbolically — his body image: the shape of his body is distorted and disfigured, the boundaries between the body and the external world are blurred, the exterior of the body is corroded by a fluid that belongs to the interior. The character's gesture can therefore be read as a provocative act that strikes at the core of his public, socio-culturally constructed body image. We have already encountered this subversive dimension of grotesque embodiment in Calvino's novel, but here this dimension is inscribed in the protagonist's own body in a way that foregrounds the experience of deformation rather than its objectifying identification with the patients of the Cottolengo hospital. By witnessing Edoardo's bizarre gesture, the audience is afforded insight into the social dimension of embodiment: the reliance of the body image on the external, public world (the mirror) is revealed through its destabilization — that is, by confounding readers' expectations regarding ordinary forms of embodiment. This process of defamiliarization of the body image occurs again and again in *Capriccio italiano*. In another striking passage, Edoardo's body blends with the body of another character: "It was a strange thing, because we lay immobile, yes, but as if mingled [*confusi*], mingled together that is, so that we could not distinguish our bodies, entangled in that way ... But it was that we couldn't distinguish them anymore, our bodies, and the confusion was such, in that way of ours of being in the world, when it's death that mingles [*confonde*] them, mingles them together that is ... And then it was also that one felt like scattered, in those waters, so that one didn't know where the bodies ended, and where the water began, instead" (86). Sanguineti's passage hints at the complete dissolution of the body image — a state in which the character returns to a prior stage of diffuse subjectivity rather than intersubjectivity. The text plays on the polysemy of the adjective "confuso," which means both "confused" in the psychological sense and "blended together" or "intermingled." The physical intermingling of the protagonist with another body is a source of understandable confusion, for both the protagonist and the reader. Not only is the distinction between self and world called into question, but the boundaries between oneself and another, one's body and another's body are blurred to the point that the protagonist is unable to identify his own body. This phenomenon signals yet another distortion in the protagonist's embodiment: the breakdown of his intersubjectively constructed body image is compounded by a failure in his pre-reflective bodily awareness, since he appears unable to recognize his body as his own through proprioception.

Such insistence on non-ordinary or grotesque forms of embodiment throughout Sanguineti's novel can bring about a defamiliarizing effect on readers, challenging their expectations about the cognitive processes and socio-cultural practices that, in various ways, define people's embodiment. Being told about the character's distorted body image and lack of bodily self-awareness may draw the reader's attention to how embodiment works in the everyday coping with the world — and to how such familiarity with embodiment is brought to bear on literary texts. It may be hypothesized that the text's defamiliarizing impact on the audience depends on the pivotal role of narrative empathy (see Keen).

In both the mirror and the diffuse subjectivity scene, and indeed in most key passages of the novel, the distortions in the narrator's embodiment are reported not from an observer's perspective (as in Calvino's text), but through the narrator's own voice and experiential viewpoint. Since *Capriccio italiano* focuses on a protagonist who goes through these strange bodily processes in a first-person way, the reader is provided sufficient phenomenological detail to relate to him via an empathetic mechanism, thus simulating his experiences at the perceptual and embodied level.

In conclusion, Calvino's novel seems to defuse the high emotional charge of its subject matter by allowing the protagonist's socio-cultural meaning-making to take center stage and by uncoupling it from readers' more experiential responses to the text. On the contrary, Sanguineti exploits his protagonist's embodied reactions in order to defamiliarize and at the same time reveal the multiple layers of embodied experience. Exploring readers' responses to these texts has enabled me to illustrate how the reader's engagement with grotesque bodies straddles many different dimensions: emotional reactions, sensory imagery, sympathy and empathy for characters, and interpretations at the socio-cultural level. Such a cognitive manifold cannot be examined through the lens of a single methodology or discipline: understanding it requires the cross-fertilization of inputs and methods from various fields. Interpretive constructions may be irreducible to the cognitive and emotional processes that fall within the scope of psychological science; yet both dimensions of reader-response have their roots in the reading experience. It is by focusing on this experience that we may capture the convergence of socio-cultural meanings and more basic responses to distorted bodies such as mental imagery and emotional reactions. Thus, I argue that phenomenology provides a theoretical framework in which one can examine the interrelations between different dimensions of embodiment. Of course, it is one thing to say that socio-cultural meanings and experiential responses are bound up; it is another thing to come up with a convincing story about how they are bound up. Breaking down this interaction can be as hard as turning what Amerigo calls the "gluey dough" of reality into a well-differentiated artichoke. I explore one aspect of this convergence: bodily and emotional responses triggered by the representation of grotesque bodies can invite the reader to attend to the socio-cultural dimension of embodiment. Readers of *The Watcher* may do so by becoming aware of the divide between the non-ordinary bodies of the patients of the Cottolengo hospital and the protagonist's reflections on disability. For his part, the reader of *Capriccio italiano* is afforded insight into the intersubjective nature of the body image through the phenomenological distortions that affect the protagonist's embodiment. Both cases are characterized by a movement from embodied and emotional responses to socio-cultural meaning-making. But this is only one half of the story: a more detailed investigation into the reading experience would reveal that socio-cultural meanings can have a profound effect on readers' emotions, sensations, and mental imagery. Such feedback loop paves the way for new directions of research in cognitive literary and cultural studies.

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Author's profile: Marco Caracciolo conducts research at University of Groningen. His interests in scholarship include cognitive approaches to literature and narrative theory. He co-authored with Marco Bernini *Letteratura e scienze cognitive* (2013). Caracciolo published articles in journals such as *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (2012), *Poetics Today* (2013), and *Narrative* (2014). Caracciolo's single-authored book *The Experientiality of Narrative* is forthcoming in 2014. E-mail: <[m.caracciolo@rug.nl](mailto:m.caracciolo@rug.nl)>